

JEP: Internal Inventory

Miguel Ángel Quemain*



José Emilio Pacheco was not afraid to be considered a cultural journalist as part of his literary efforts. He described his extensive work this way, as a disseminator and interpreter of the international and Mexican literary tradition.

In the national sphere, he is not the only one who made journalism into a space for invention and imagination in the field of language. He is, however, the author with the most diverse and richest body of work, striving to make journalism an art, a piece of literature, without losing the solidity and density that would allow it to run along the tracks of history. He understood history as an inquiry based on a documentary axis to construct atmospheres, show intellectual,

political links, and social and administrative determinations about those involved in the construction of cultural evolution, particularly that of literature.

THE ROAD TOWARD THE “INVENTORY,” OR RETELLING WORLD

His penchant for correspondence between writers, photographs, interviews, and autobiographies are elements that appear in that form of writing that has become a genre of its own: the literary column. This is a way of constructing a world crisscrossed by a history whose elements are neither obvious nor perceptible at first glance. Many writers have been interviewed about his death. One of them, Marco Antonio Campos, recognized that his work is a fresco of Mexican literature spanning several decades.

*Essayist and cultural journalist, quemainmx@gmail.com.

Photos in this section, courtesy of DGCS, UNAM.

His column “Inventario”
is one of the most important in our language
because of his vocation for documenting our literary
history and the themes that define
the twentieth-century tradition.

Pacheco had already tried several styles of literary column before writer Ignacio Solares convinced him to at least put his initials on his column “Inventario” (Inventory), carried in the *Excelsior* newspaper’s supplement “Diorama de la cultura” (Cultural Diorama), which first appeared August 5, 1973. It is one of the most important in our language because of his vocation for documenting our literary history, the trajectory both of authors and works, and the themes that define the twentieth-century tradition. The precedents for this new genre called inventory can be found in his initial columns: “Simpatías y diferencias” (Sympathies and Differences), in the *Revista de la Universidad de México*, from 1960 to 1963; “Calendario” (Calendar), in “La cultura en México”; followed by a brief experience in the supplement of the newspaper *El heraldo de México*.

A column dedicated to literary, cultural criticism always has strict space limitations. Generally, the lay-out designer establishes an outline where very few words fit. Only in very few cases is that restriction resolved by writing a long essay on the topic, which will in turn be limited by being published in a magazine, but whose end goal is to become part of a book. At least that is how Raquel Tibol, the art critic for *Proceso* magazine, and Jorge Ayala Blanco, one of the most important film critics in Latin America for the last 40 years, both in “La cultura en México” and in *Revista mexicana de cultura*, have operated.

José Emilio Pacheco did not experience that lava that circulates in igneous veins for organizing events in a chronicle in the way that Carlos Monsiváis and then José Joaquín Blanco did. Neither did he go out onto the street to gather testimonies or interview all kinds of people like Elena Poniatowska and Cristina Pacheco, herself a felicitous combination of interviewer, chronicler, and reporter, have.

Pacheco proceeded to create the illusion of an inventory with the certainty that the universe of retelling was inexhaustible and the task infinite. But what is fascinating today is that this enormous body of work, inventoried with the meticulousness more of the collector than the administrator of wealth, has its counterpart in the mental vastness of the one who does the retelling and the classifying. To the point

that the classification itself is part of an invention whose branches are more due to a personal labyrinth than the known, predictable well-known strains of our tree of knowledge, that form of genealogy by materials that orders archives and libraries to make them legible for everyone.

In this retelling of the world, this cultural journalist learned to arm himself, like Monsiváis, with magical scissors that pruned contents that generations of young writers preserved obsessively to satiate their curiosity, their hunger for the literary world.

If we trace the origin and development of this inventory, we perceive that the genre of the column itself was enriched by a series of approximations that involve not only the information disseminated and the specialized account of literary novelties. Little by little, the modesty of anonymity had to be swept aside, and Pacheco accepted signing his column with his initials, JEP.

In issue 1944 of *Proceso* magazine, poet and editor Rafael Vargas presented a very complete review of the literary columns that form the context for “Inventario,” and that show the relationship between readers and literary criticism. He also shows the development of magazines and supplements as the natural places where literature is discussed, reviewed, and considered as the interest *par excellence* of Mexican intellectual life. He includes the exemplary, inspiring columns by Jaime García Terrés and Octavio Paz. The first had published “La feria de los días” (The Fair of Days) in the *Revista de la Universidad de México* for eight years, beginning in 1963. Octavio Paz, in the university’s magazine, published the excellent column that he later used as the title of one of his books of essays, “Corriente alterna” (Alternate Current).

For many years, various authors born in the 1950s have attempted to “rescue” this journalism Pacheco published from 1973 to July 8, 1976, and which he continued to publish from 1976, the year *Proceso* magazine was founded, until the day of his death, when his last article was published, dedicated to the memory to a fellow poet, Juan Gelman.

He began the column when he was 34, and it is the work of a mature writer, who by then had published three very significant books of stories (*La sangre de Medusa* [The Blood of Medusa], 1959; *El viento distante* [The Distant Wind], 1963; and *El principio del placer* [The Pleasure Principle], 1972), and some volumes of poetry that defined him as a great creator who ushered in the 1980s to the sound of applause. That is, he was a writer who did cultural journalism, not a cultural journalist turned writer. This characteristic creative

maturity situates José Emilio as an indispensable guide for coming generations.

What was it that made José Emilio Pacheco refuse to publish his inventories in the definitive form of a book? I would venture to field a hypothesis that might seem uncomfortable: perhaps it was because he always considered that the space for his contributions was minimal, and he was always unsatisfied with the limited exposition of his ideas; he might have promised himself he would develop and complete them *when he had more time*.

JEP'S POLYGRAPHY

Pacheco, always surrounded by books; Monsiváis, by newspapers; Monsiváis, always in the street, at marches, in salons; while Pacheco stayed home, since he made his reading and writing a permanent exercise, perhaps the longest and most incessant of his life. He did not hide his affiliations; his work is an exhibition of *sympathies and differences*; he makes an effort to show his reading, to introduce authors that would take years to arrive in Mexico translated to “Madrid Spanish,” and his commentaries made it possible to anticipate their reading and criticism. In short, he is a journalist who reads and shares readings.

Pacheco represents what a lot of cultural journalists of today cannot achieve: that quality of being a polygraph, that is, of being a prolific writer on so many themes, which makes him one of the Mexican journalists with the broadest range in our language, an enormous merit, since Latin American journalists often shine only in the sphere of the local.

Welcome to the banquet of the world, of the contemporaneous and the universal. José Emilio Pacheco had a very broad horizon of knowledge about literature and international cinema that included the possibility of reading in several languages all the magazines, supplements, and newspapers that fell into his hands and which he shared with friends truly erudite in the topic like Sergio Pitol, Margo Glantz, and Carlos Monsiváis, who was always up on the popular culture relatively unfrequented by the intellectuals of the time. The Portales neighborhood, where Carlos lived, was that referential world that also formed José Emilio.

In that search, he also included what was ours, buried under tons of indifference, but also tons of dust, of oblivion, of everything that paralyzes our past for such deplorable reasons as bureaucratic disdain dominated by ignorance and

Pacheco represents what a lot of cultural journalists of today cannot achieve: that quality of being a polygraph, that is, of being a prolific writer on so many themes.

personal interests, until the natural death that overcomes the works that do not tell the person of today things about him/herself that he/she did not know or did not know that he/she knew.

INVENTORY OF THE ABODE

If his literary career had only consisted of writing “Inventory,” it would be enough to put him in the same imaginary territory where Guilles Deleuze put Michel Foucault, as the great archivist of the city, the city of the imagination, invisible cities, royal city, putrid and indispensable city that has the word as the axis of its existence; the documented, imagined, described city, chronicled in literature and its peripheries.

Pacheco is a writer who, through an inventory of emotions, or the registries of friendship—but also of abjection, envy, forgetfulness—shows in his work a face similar to the one Proust and Balzac did for the Paris of yesterday.

I think the conditioning factors of this fruitful dialogue that characterizes his writing are, among many, the way of understanding and exercising journalism and literature seamlessly without separating their strategies and imaginations. All of this is marked by an ethics regarding language, social life, and politics, due to his ability to cover pain, to fictionalize day-to-day misfortunes and show those trans-historic forms of the self: an inventory of a world with the rigor of monitoring and imagination.

One aspect that has come to light in these very emotional moments is the profound tenderness and goodness that framed his family relationships, with his daughters and his wife Cristina Pacheco, one of our indispensable journalists, whose enormous human qualities, I can only imagine, made him fall into abiding love.

I did not have the good fortune of knowing him personally, but I did hear firsthand accounts of his honor regarding his work, his discipline, and his generosity. While he was a very reserved man, his was the isolation not of a man terrified of the world, but of its banality. ■■■